

Historic, Archive Document

Do not assume content reflects current scientific knowledge, policies, or practices.

Research on Sizing of Children's Clothing

A dialogue between Miss Ruth Van Deman, Bureau of Home Economics, and Mr. Morse Salisbury, Radio Service, delivered in the Department of Agriculture period of the National Farm and Home Hour, broadcast by a network of 48 associate NBC stations, Thursday, April 8, 1937.

- - - -

MR. SALISBURY: Now turning to our speakers from the Department of Agriculture, first comes Ruth Van Deman with another of her weekly reports from the Bureau of Home Economics. Ruth, what's new around your bailiwick? Any new bulletins coming off the press, or any new projects starting?

MISS VAN DEMAN: Not any new bulletins right now. But there is one very interesting new project getting under way.

MR. SALISBURY: You mean that study on garment sizes? I've heard that mentioned.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Yes. It's a plan to measure a large number of children, and get figures on which to base an accurate system of garment sizes.

Ever since the Bureau of Home Economics was organized people have been writing to us asking why something couldn't be done about the sizes of ready-made clothes for children. I remember one woman said that for her six year old boy she was buying age 12 overalls, and age 10 suits, and even then she couldn't tell how any of them were going to fit until she got them home and tried them on the boy.

MR. SALISBURY: You mean the whole business is haywire. There's no certainty that two suits marked for age 10 will be the same size in chest measure, and waist band, and so on.

MISS VAN DEMAN: That's the state of affairs exactly, in children's ready-made clothes. One manufacturer has his system of sizing, and another his, and so on. Then you never can tell when some are going to skimp cut so they can get more garments out of a piece of goods, and undersell their competitors. When they do that of course they make the garments smaller on one part or another. No telling where the skimping will be.

Then what so-called "systems" of sizing there are, are not based on real measurements of a large group of youngsters representative of modern American children. Nobody has ever gone out and taken exact body measurements on a large number of Americans of any age with a view to working out a standard system for sizing ready-made garments or patterns of home use either. So that's what we're starting to do now - collect measurements of boys and girls. Then the manufacturers of underwear, and dresses, and suits, and sweaters, and playsuits, and so on, will have a real foundation for standardizing their sizes in each type of garment.

(over)

MR. SALISBURY: Do you have anthropometrists in your bureau who can take all these measurements. Anthropometrist is the word, I believe, for a person trained in the science of measuring the human body.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Yes, that's the word. Just at present we have only one anthropometrist on the staff, but last week there were a number of others in from colleges in various parts of the country, consulting on the exact measurements to be taken. We'll be working in cooperation with them right along in at least six States.

MR. SALISBURY: Which ones?

MISS VAN DEMAN: Iowa, Texas, New York, Pennsylvania. That's four. Oh yes. Kansas and Minnesota, those are the other two.

MR. SALISBURY: They're good geographical distribution. How many youngsters do you want to measure in all?

MISS VAN DEMAN: About 100,000 all the way of all ages from one to 14 years. And we want them from families of high, low, and medium income groups, and of different racial background.

MR. SALISBURY: This is to be a real cross section of American childhood.

MISS VAN DEMAN: It has to be if it's to be any good for the purpose.

MR. SALISBURY: Very true. And how many measurements on each child.

MISS VAN DEMAN: There are 34 on the list at present. If you happened to be in the business of designing a child's one-piece playsuit or underwear or pajamas you'd have need of every one of these 34. Even for a skirt or a sweater, the designer needs 19 different measurements.

MR. SALISBURY: How will all these be taken, with special instruments?

MISS VAN DEMAN: Yes, there will be a standard kit of instruments including a steel tape measure and an anthropometer.

MR. SALISBURY: What does an anthropometer look like?

MISS VAN DEMAN: Like a tall shiny perpendicular tube with a sliding cross arm, pointed at one end. When you look closer you see a scale of measure running the length of the metal tube and you notice that the cross arm can be stopped to take the height at the waist, or knee, or any other point, with far greater accuracy than you could get with a yardstick or other ordinary tools for measuring that we're accustomed to.

MR. SALISBURY: Well, Ruth, here's a point that puzzles me. If garment makers haven't had accurate measurements such as you describe, taken by trained anthropometrists, what are they using now as a basis for their patterns and scale of sizes? Have they just made up something?

MISS VAN DEMAN: That's a good question, Morse. It bothered me until I had it explained by Ruth O'Brien, head of our clothing division.

The measurements used now go so far back they are called traditional. Some of them go back to the theories of art developed by the sculptors of Ancient Greece and the painters of 13th and 14th Century Europe - men like Leonardo da Vinci and Albrecht Durer. They worked out so-called canons of correct proportions for the human body. I'm sure you've heard of the one giving the total height of the body as seven times the head.

MR. SALISEURY: Yes, I've wondered about that. I knew that I was no Apollo Belvidere according to that.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Well, if you were a woman and had struggled to find ready-made clothes to fit you, you'd be dead certain they were designed for some slim goddess with a celestial form far different from your own mortal frame and all-too-solid flesh. Oftentimes I've had to have dresses ripped up and almost made over on me.

MR. SALISEURY: And paid a fat bill for alterations, I've no doubt.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Out of all proportion to the value of the garment sometimes! And then never felt comfortable in the dress. This business of alterations and loss of good will through failure to fit garments satisfactorily costs the retail stores a pretty penny every year.

MR. SALISEURY: Well of course the situation in children's clothes can't be so bad as that, at least so damaging in dollars and cents.

MISS VAN DEMAN: No, but it runs into considerable money beside all the wear and tear on the dispositions of those who buy and those who sell and those who run around in the clothes.

Now that so much emphasis is being placed on good posture for children and better physical development and coordination of muscles, we know that clothes play a greater part than we used to think.

A child's clothes need to hang right on his body, so that the shoulder seams and the other main structural lines fall in the right places for comfort when he runs and plays as well as when he sits and stands still.

Then there's the psychological effect of properly fitted clothes. That begins very very early in childhood. These are things that are far deeper than style and passing fads and fashions. They are some of the deep-lying aspects of clothing that affect a person's well-being.

MR. SALISEURY: Ruth, this has been very interesting, to me at least. I'd heard this measurement study mentioned, but I didn't really know what it was all about. I didn't realize that the results would mean so much commercially and in other ways. As the project goes along I hope you give us progress reports now and then.

MISS VAN DEMAN: I'll do that. And good-bye everybody until next Thursday.

